

## February 14, 2009 - Winning Recipe: Armagh Hot-Dog Business Adds Second Location

The Tribune-Democrat

[www.tribune-democrat.com](http://www.tribune-democrat.com)

Winning recipe: Armagh  
hot-dog business adds second location

BY TOM LAVIS

February 14, 2009

Craig McLaughlin drove a beer truck for six years but wasn't going anywhere.

With a leap of faith, encouragement from his family and about \$6,000, he took a detour that changed his life.

Calling McLaughlin "Craig" is like calling Babe Ruth "George."

It might be his given name, but for as long as he can remember, the 34-year-old McLaughlin has been known as Bull.

So it was no surprise that when he started selling hot dogs from a New York-style hot-dog cart set up in an unpaved Armagh parking lot, he called his business Bull Dogs.

That was in 2002. McLaughlin has gone from hawking hot dogs from a cart under a canopy to opening his second restaurant in December in Blairsville.

In the early years, the young entrepreneur battled frigid cold, searing sun and dusty highways as he manned his hot-dog cart six days a week.

"A lot of people said I would never make it, but when anyone says something

like that, it just pushes me to work harder," McLaughlin said from the comfort of his new restaurant that seats 40 people.

The spotless restaurant is located along the busy Route 22 corridor and across the highway from the Wal-Mart plaza.

McLaughlin recalls how he sold 147 hot dogs on his first day of business in Armagh.

The initial menu included an all-beef hot dog on a potato bun with a choice of mustard, ketchup or both. He also sold soft drinks from a cooler and a variety of snack chips.

Word of mouth and a steady stream of vehicle traffic compelled him to eventually relocate across the highway onto his family's property, where he put up a 16-foot-by-18-foot shed to accommodate the increasing flow of business.

Later, a permanent structure was built, and Bull Dogs restaurant was established permanently at Route 56 and Philadelphia Street in Armagh.

McLaughlin is a tall, personable man who treats every customer the way he wants to be treated: With respect.

"That's my philosophy," he said. "It seems like I could never get ahead in life, and I told myself if I was going to do this, it would be with my whole heart, and I would treat my customers right."

McLaughlin has a high-school education and earned a two-year associate degree in criminology.

He and his wife, Lana, whom he married in 2007, have been working side-by-side to grow the business.

The decision to build a second restaurant was a difficult one.

"We prayed over it, and if we got the loan from the bank, then we believed it is God's will," she said.

The two restaurants are different.

The Armagh location has a country feel with picnic tables covered with plastic tablecloths.

There are plenty of napkins, which are needed because of the generous amount of toppings.

“Anyone buying a hot dog from us will pay no more than \$1.50,” McLaughlin said. “I don’t care if you put one topping on or 10, it’s still the same price.”

Through the years, the McLaughlins have discovered that hot dogs are enjoyed by people from all walks of life.

“On any given day, you could have two students, two truck drivers, a doctor and a couple of attorneys waiting in line to buy some dogs,” McLaughlin said.

“Even Congressman (John) Murtha is a familiar customer.”

Murtha recalls when McLaughlin started serving hot dogs.

“He started out with a little shack in Armagh, but it wasn’t long before he was constructing a brand new building for the business,” Murtha said. “Bull serves a fantastic hot dog, and the guy knows everyone in town and those just passing through. It’s pretty obvious why he’s got a successful business, and I wish him luck with the second location.”

Murtha is a true politician when it comes to revealing his favorite hot dog and what he likes on it.

If it’s a Coney Island hot dog, he likes all the toppings. If it’s from Sheetz, he likes mustard and relish.

“At Bull’s, I like hot-pepper relish,” he said.

The McLaughlins have expanded the menu at the Blairsville site.

People can choose from 20 toppings ranging from the ever-popular chili sauce or sauerkraut and melted cheese to hot pepper relish.

“We added fresh-cut potatoes for our French fries, which we don’t have in Armagh,” McLaughlin

said. "We have a wide variety of other toppings on the serving counter, and people can help themselves."

They also offer a soup of the day, nachos, chips and drinks.

"There is no real secret recipe," McLaughlin said. "We have a quality all-beef hot dog that is big enough to stick out both sides of a soft, fresh bun.

"I think the bun makes the hot dog."

While most people thought he was insane for setting up a cart in a parking lot, McLaughlin's late father, Harry McLaughlin, believed in his son.

"He was a big part of this and was very supportive when I started," McLaughlin said. "My only regret is that when he got pancreatic cancer, he didn't live long enough to see all of this."

Family is important to the McLaughlins. So much so that it is not unusual to see many members involved in the day-to-day operations.

McLaughlin's mother, Florence, 77, of Armagh, continues to do all the ordering of supplies for both shops.

Lana McLaughlin's sister, Lisa Carrick of Penn Run, works in Blairsville, and family friend Jennifer Smith of Armagh, manages the original shop.

The original hot-dog cart, which was purchased from a Connecticut company, still is in use at the original shop. It worked so well that McLaughlin bought two more for his Blairsville operation.

"People wonder why I didn't use regular restaurant steamer tables, but I don't argue with success, and the carts fill the bill perfectly," he said.